LIFE IN LESU

CHAPTER I

SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

THREE degrees south of the equator in the Western Pacific is the village of Lesu, on the east coast of New Ireland, part of the Bismarck Archipelago, a group of islands lying north-east of Australia. The New Irelanders are the tall, more or less well-built Melanesian type, with kinky black hair, brown skin, and somewhat negroid features, and are a hospitable, kindly, good-natured people. In the past the men wore no clothing at all and the women only a straw apron. To-day, however, because of white influence, everyone wears a loin-cloth, and the women sometimes wear blouses, but most of the time these are omitted.

In size, New Ireland is the second largest island of the Bismarck Archipelago, and is long and narrow in shape. Running through the centre is a low range of mountains, about 3,000 feet at their highest altitude. Along the coast, beginning at the northern end, runs a road for over a hundred miles, one of the few roads in the whole Territory of New Guinea. The road follows the coast in a winding fashion, uphill and downhill, and over it travel the natives, by foot, and occasionally by bicycle, from one village to another. Long stretches of road have on one side the dense bush with its thick undergrowth of tangled vines, its bright-coloured flowers, among them the familiar south-sea hibiscus, the tall coconut palms, the delicate bamboo trees, the nodding areca palms, and many other trees over which fly brightly plumed birds. On the other side lies a sea which is dazzlingly brilliant in the sunshine, its glare broken here

1: Powdermaker E-5 (1929-1930) 1933 OM10 New Ireland OM10
Lesu

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THE "LULUAI" OR CHIEF

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A HAPPY FAMILY IN FRONT OF THEIR HOME

[Facing p. 43]

1: Powdermaker E-5 (1929-1930) 1933 OM10 New Ireland OM10
Lesu

832 [587] died she married a fairly mature man. She added that she liked him, too.

The firmness of a woman's breasts is much stressed. The breasts are uncovered, and so are very obvious. A middle-aged woman's breasts which hang loosely are not objects of beauty by any aesthetic standards.

832 302 The hair, which is kinky and stands out from the head, is an important factor in beauty, and much time and attention are put on it. The natural colour of the hair is black, but it is very rarely that it is seen in this colour. It is the universal custom for both sexes of all ages to "paint" their hair with powdered white lime, and the result is a great variety in shades of tan, depending on when it was last "painted." [1] The hair is frequently combed, and if a native wants to make himself particularly attractive he spends hours on his hair, combing, "painting" it, etc. A flower behind the ear, a wreath of leaves around the head, are all considered adornments.[2] Practically everyone has lice, and [515] looking for each other's lice is a never-ending pastime between friends. A bald-headed man is considered an object [142] of ridicule and very ugly. He is a most unusual type, and there were none in Lesu. I had for a short time a Papuan cook-boy who was bald. He tried to seduce some of the village women, but without success. They all laughed at him, and mocked him openly for his baldness. He was also short, another point not in his favour. He finally took to boasting of his conquests on other islands where he had worked, but this, too, left the village belles untouched. Women prefer clean-shaven men to bearded ones. In the

[1] For many of the ritual dances the hair is "painted" red or blue. A few of the more sophisticated natives who have been to Rabaul have learned the whitening effect of peroxide, and use it whenever they can procure it.

[2] I gave them some tinsel (Christmas-tree decoration) and gaily coloured crêpe paper. Both were immediately put around the hair in the fashion of a crown and were much in demand.

1: Powdermaker E-5 (1929-1930) 1933 OM10 New Ireland OM10
Lesu

RAIN MAGICIAN

MAKING TARO MAGIC

[facing p. 304]

3:Chinnery G, E-5 (1929)1931 OM10 New Ireland O

423 Portion Nosi—Belonging to clan Balus, sub-group, Lamis. Principal man, Arkai of Madina and later of Larsibin, who will receive the purchase money and
432 distribute it according to custom.

614 Portion Porokalaman—Belonging to clan Babanga, sub-group, Savinu. Principal man, Lamani of Madina, who will receive the purchase money and distribute it in accordance with custom. In this case the Luluai of Luaupul and Arakai of Madina are entitled to a share as compensation for gifts of ground made by the original owners to their ancestors and parents, the Luluai of Luaupul being the son of the sister of Lombu, the last owner of the ground. Lombu, before he died, permitted the father of Arakai to plant and use part of the ground.

Portion Seladara—Belonging to Mununga k clan. Principal man, Kauavek of Madina, who will distribute it among the people entitled. In this case, two women of Lugagun share in the purchase money.

Portion Lemagaf—Belonging to clan Arigaum. Names of principal men not given.

Portion Naberabera—Belonging to clan Balus. Names of principal men not given.

The last two portions belong to people of Luaupul, who were not present at the inquiry, and regarding whose ownership the people of Madina were unable to give me particulars.

142 Physically the people of the East coast are of medium height and robust build. They are woolly-haired and brown-eyed; the skin colour varies from light to dark brown, many being almost black; usually the cheek bones are prominent; in many cases the nose is concave and deep-rooted below prominent brow ridges, but a straight or convex nose is frequently seen. There is little prognathism. Many of the men and women are distinctly pleasant faced. Usually the hair is [302] bleached with lime, and worn fairly short in well-combed frizzy mops. In the vicinity of Kandan I saw bald-headed old men wearing neatly made wigs of human hair twisted into short ringlets. There are many [143] fair-haired people with brick-red skin who were said to have been born thus, and two or three cases of true albinism were found.

226 The coastal people fish with spears, nets and lines. In many places they go out into deep water in canoes, and catch sharks by the noose and rattle method that has been described before. Shark fishing expeditions are attended with considerable magical preparation. Representations of sharks appear in the carved portions of the canoe. Small fish for bait are caught secretly at night "so that sharks will not know what is threatening them." No one but the fisherman sees this going on. The operation involves certain sacrifices on the part of those engaged in it, such as food tabu, keeping away from women, &c. The expedition starts at break of dawn, before any one else is awake. The canoe men watch their opportunity and shoot out through the breakers. They make their way right out to sea looking for timber and drift wood washed out by the rains. Here small fish gather together in large numbers and attract the sharks. The rattles are sounded and the sharks thinking it is the noise made by sea birds